

Postmodernity: Challenge and Opportunity

By Jonathan Thornton

Come gather 'round people,
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters,
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon,
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you, is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone,
For the times they are a-changin'.

Bob Dylan, *The Times, They Are A-Changin'*, 1964.

The secular North American citizen is a dying breed. Numerous research engines and think tanks have concluded as much over the last decade. Yet, all one needs is a quick perusal of much Christian literature cur-

rently in book stores to come to the conclusion that the church seems unaware of this profound change that has taken place in the last thirty years. Part of this tendency can likely be traced to the penchant for large populations of popular Christianity to thrive off of naming enemies.

Whether we are naming as enemies liberals, homosexuals, Catholics, or pro-choice proponents, we tend to raise more money and gain higher numbers of followers if we can scare individuals into thinking we alone can stave off the end of Christendom. As a result, the old enemy of the modern age, scientific based secular humanism, remains the main focus of the church's missional agenda in North America. Yet the reality remains that much of North America has traded in the promises of secularism for a future defined by forms of postmodernism.

In response to the failure of the modern agenda (in both its religious and secular forms) increasing numbers of Americans are experiencing life through different lenses; lenses of plurality, relativity, and community. From the outset it is important to note



Jonathan Thornton is associate youth pastor at Pacific Union College Church, Angwin, CA.

that although the philosophical ideas that comprise postmodernism are hotly debated and considered by many to be past its heyday, postmodernity as a culture is a powerful and growing cultural force in our contemporary world. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor provide a solid description of the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity.

Postmodernism comprises the theory, the philosophical views about the subject, and is for all intents and purposes dead in the water. . . . The average person on the street has little interest in wrestling with the postmodern theorists; life is moving way too quickly and the theories are diverse and lack cohesion. But postmodernity is alive and kicking. It is the culture, the way of life, that rolls along with barely an acknowledgment of the theory that supposedly birthed it (2003:24, 25).

Postmodern philosophy achieved its success and notoriety for its ability to expose many of the misguided assumptions of the modern philosophical agenda. Postmodern philosophers zeroed in on the inability of the modern agenda to achieve the utopia it promised, and by doing so provided those who felt marginalized by modernity with a voice in academic circles. Postmodernism has not, however, been able to articulate a coherent and usable program or agenda. As a result, much of the momentum it experienced in the 1960s and 1970s has dissipated. As a philosophical school

of thought, postmodernism has largely given way to other philosophical inquiries seeking to bring about a coherent vision of a post-postmodern program.

Yet, as Detweiler and Taylor point out, the culture of postmodernity is thriving, daily gaining more and more adherents to its way of life and cultural understandings. It is the vast populations of emerging generations to which the church owes a response and thoughtful engagement. To continue to pursue an anti-secularity agenda is to ensure our irrelevance in the coming cultural reality. Therefore, what follows is a brief description and interaction with a typical postmodern individual.

Much of the philosophy and mindset of postmodernity defies categorization and is, indeed, a reaction against the belief that one can be placed into a neatly defined group. However, it is still helpful to paint with broad strokes who our neighbors are so that we may participate in the redemption of our communities.

In an attempt to avoid pointing out only the shortcomings of those who hold postmodern worldviews, a task that has already been addressed by numerous conservative Christian commentators, I hope to evaluate what elements of postmodernism can benefit the Christian church in its attempt to spread the Kingdom of God.

1. Communal Truth vs. Propositional Truth

Beginning in the 1960s an antifoundationalist movement, which had roots in the nineteenth century with Friedrich Nietzsche and G. W. F. Hegel, was popularized and re-infused with contemporary meaning by Jacques Derrida, Francois Lyotard, and Michel Foucault. These philosophers challenged the long held notion of Cartesian epistemology. They vigorously challenged the notion that an objective, undeniable, and unassailable *foundation* of knowledge could be discovered that would

and an anything goes type of program. Instead it is fairer to say that it came about as the result of thoughtful contemplation and inquiry as well as a response to the failure of the modern agenda to make good on its claims. The modern agenda, both religious and secular, held the belief that correct thinking, founded on good solid information, would lead to correct actions in all circumstances. The advent of two world wars as well as highly publicized moral failure in the highest offices of leadership around the world sent individuals in search of different answers.

To continue to pursue an anti-secularity agenda is to ensure our irrelevance in the coming cultural reality.

allow one to proceed in building an edifice of truth. Taylor and Detweiler, two men immersed not only in the academy, but also in the contemporary pop culture, observe that “most people have not read the philosophical ideas behind postmodern theory; they’ve simply experienced them. Few have heard of Jean Beaudrillard or Jacques Derrida, but they have a practical knowledge that things have changed, and changed dramatically” (Detweiler and Taylor 2003:24).

It is important to note that the postmodern agenda is not the result of a desire for hedonism

As a result emerging cultures now share a healthy skepticism of absolute truth claims. In place of absolute truth claims based on an infallible foundation, postmodern populations tend to gravitate toward shared truth, shared meaning, and shared praxis of that truth and meaning. This is not necessarily the *everyone for himself, do whatever you want, everything means whatever you want it to mean* point of view that has been ascribed to postmodern populations by uninformed commentators. Rather, much deference is given to the group as a whole as

postmodern populations seek to discover together what is true in society, life, and love. True, radical relativism does exist in some small populations, as it has for centuries. We all recognize that it is a dangerous ideology. However, the most popular Christian response of blind faith to extreme absolutist truth propositions causes far more problems than it solves.

Response to 1

I believe that Christianity has created many of the problems concerning the relativism of the postmodern agenda. We

community should deliberately seek creative responses to their ministry contexts. Three possible alternatives may include:

1) Place an emphasis on embodying truth, leading our communities to emphasize living in such a way that the truth is made real, tangible, and attractive to those who do not share our presuppositions.

2) Involve as many people as possible in the task of discovering what is true in the Bible. We must hear what God has to say from as many different perspectives as possible. In this way, hopefully we can avoid the ap-

The *post* in post-rational should not be read as *against* reason. Rather it is a part of their worldview that understands life to include more than the rational.

pushed so hard to maintain our privileged position as *the* arbiters of truth that we lost our way. Instead of seeking to serve humanity and love as Jesus taught, we fought to become rulers of the population through the correctness of our absolute doctrine. We exchanged, in many ways, the cross for a crown.

Moving postmodern individuals from an unhealthy relativism toward a more Kingdom oriented worldview will require profound changes in our methodology, language, and overall assumptions. Leaders in the local Christian

appearance of an organization that thinks it owns the truth.

3) Be open to the criticisms and fears of people who are wary of absolute truth. Understanding why they have come to this position is more important (and says more about those of us with absolute truth claims) than trying to immediately prove our point. Many of us have existed in communities who share an almost universal acceptance of absolute truth for so long that we are unaware of many of the fair criticisms our neighbors may have regarding those with absolute truth claims.

2. Post-Rational Approach to Life

I don't need no one to tell me
about heaven
I look at my daughter, and I believe
I don't need no proof when it
comes to God and Truth
I can see the sunset and I perceive
Live, Birds of Prey, 2003.

Postmodern populations are often post-rational in their approach to life. The *post* in post-rational should not be read as *against* reason. Rather it is a part of their worldview that understands life to include more than the rational. The post describes a sense of evolving out of a rational worldview into something that better corresponds to contemporary life. The rational continues to play a role in life and it is an important role. However, it is no longer the sole arbiter of truth in the postmodern world.

This postmodern critique of rationality is a needed reminder that "our humanity does not consist solely in our cognitive dimension" (Grenz 1996:169). Therefore, in addition to the logic and coherence of a particular worldview or ideology, aesthetic value, communal response, and the ability to inspire and transcend our earthly existence play important roles in a postmodern person's approach to life.

Response to 2

Living as a missional community among a post-rational society will require Christian leaders to learn how to bring

aesthetic beauty, artistic expression, and creative response to life, God, and each other to the forefront. This is not to diminish the place or importance of sound biblical teaching and exploration. It is simply an attempt to operate with the understanding that truth always exceeds the rational. Space must be made for the community to display and then respond to the art created by the community. Christian leaders should move their communities to the place where the worship gatherings will contain more than rational explanations of faith by a preacher to a passive audience to a place where all are involved in offering worship to God in unique and creative ways.

3. Secular Space vs. Sacred Space

An important aspect of the modern agenda was the secularizing of as much of life as possible. Operating under the belief that rational investigation would be able to solve most if not all of life's problems, and in response to the overbearing influence of the institutional church, the Enlightenment period ushered in a new understanding of space. The church/religion was given that part of life and experience that was directly related to worship. The rest of life was placed in the secular category, devoid of the influence of God, and under the tutelage of science.

Modern Christianity, rather than challenging this worldview, accepted it as part of their cul-

tural identity. As one missiologist has commented, "The church accepted its role as chaplain of the sacred and allowed the rest of the world to be governed by science" (Ryan Bolger, thebolgblog.com).

Postmodern culture has rejected this sacred/secular divide and come to recognize that all of life is the domain of the Divine. In fact, much of the rise of Wiccan communities and Neo-New Age spirituality in the last two decades can possibly be attributed to Christianity's choice to ignore the earth as a means by which God can be accessed and encountered through his creation. Instead of only displaying fear toward Wicca, the

be redeemed by God and his Kingdom purposes. It is the responsibility of the leaders of the community of faith to push, prod, and pull the community to live their faith in all areas of life, not just a weekend service. The Christian church in the modern era has relied heavily on the weekend worship service to be the delivery system of the Kingdom of God.

In a culture that increasingly disregards the modern division between the sacred and secular, the church community itself must become the delivery system for the Kingdom of God. It will be important for the majority of "church" activities to take place

Postmodern culture has rejected the sacred/secular divide and come to recognize that all of life is the domain of the Divine.

church should also choose to learn about itself and its possible deficiencies by understanding what makes Wicca attractive to so many people. Increasing numbers of postmodern populations and communities are skeptical of any claims to speak for God that do not show a reverence for God's creation.

Response to 3

The church community must begin to live with the awareness that all of life is sacred and can

outside of the "sacred hour" of the weekend. Participating in community events, not as church people, but as fellow travelers and missionaries will be of vital importance.

4. Wary of Those Claiming Power

An important aspect of postmodern philosophy was developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault. Following the tumultuous events surrounding the student uprisings in 1968,

Foucault became a savage critic of the use of power in nearly every academic discipline. According to Stanley Grenz, Foucault came to the conclusion that Western society has made three fundamental errors over the course of the last three hundred years in believing, (1) that an objective body of knowledge exists and is waiting to be discovered, (2) that humanity actually possesses such knowledge and that it is neutral or value-free, and (3) that the pursuit of knowledge benefits all humankind rather than just a specific class (Grenz 1996:131). This über-philosopher applied his understanding of the role of power to everything from the philosophy of history to epistemology.

For Foucault, knowledge, because it is embedded in the world, is subject to and involved in the power games and clashes that make up our world. He boldly claimed that “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (1977:27, 28). Foucault would go on to claim that knowledge is not ultimately the result of our observations of data, but rather is the result of power struggles that determine the “forms and possible domains of knowledge” (1977:28). He argued that those in power do not work for the betterment of others, but to maintain their own power and superiority, often

at the expense of those outside their camp. Although virtually unknown to the Christian community, Foucault is a giant in postmodern philosophy and his ideas permeate much of the culture of postmodernity, even if those living in that culture fail to recognize their indebtedness to his work.

As a result there is a tendency to view with skepticism anyone claiming to be the sole possessor of truth or knowledge. Dialogue and conversation is valued over a top down style of communication. It is a mistake to assume a satellite presentation of the message of the Three Angels of Revelation is going to carry the same communicative power with postmodern generations that it had with those who grew up in the modern world. Rather than winning their confidence, such an approach tends to garner their skepticism and derision.

Response to 4

In order to avoid the appearance of a power hungry values police, it will be important for the Christian church, especially those in the service of leadership, to participate in the greater community with a sense of humility, living as one who is eager to learn from others. Much of contemporary Christianity in America bases its interaction with popular culture on the flawed belief that God only speaks through the Christian church. This view, however, seems to be contrary to the overriding narrative of

the Bible. The Bible tells a story in which God is always active, whether or not we are present. As a result, we can engage others with the knowledge that although we have much to give, we also have much to learn. By interacting with the community in a humble and open manner, we no longer have to fight for supremacy and can become fellow travelers with those who are not like us.

5. Gospel of the Kingdom vs. Gospel of Eternal Life

There's a kingdom called Heaven,
A place where there is
no pain of birth.
There's a kingdom called Heaven,
A place where there is
no pain of birth.
Well the Lord created it, mister,
About the same time
He made the earth

Bob Dylan, *Gonna Change My Way of Thinking*, 1979.

Postmodern generations tend to be very open to an approach to God that places an emphasis on the here and now, the creation of the Kingdom of God, rather than an emphasis on a heavenly reward to come later. Contrary to the very popular assumption that young people today are self-centered and privileged, those growing up with postmodern mindsets and worldviews tend to have an intense desire to make a difference in their world. As a result, fear based approaches to evangelism that attempt to scare people with the threat of hell or the reward of heaven are

increasingly counterproductive in younger generations with postmodern mindsets. As far as postmodern communities are concerned, this kind of approach tends to announce the church's irrelevance.

Response to 5

When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God, it was almost exclusively focused on the here and now. As the main communicator for the community of faith, Christian leaders should embrace the responsibility to speak often and lovingly of the Kingdom of God and how it can be established right now.

Placing the focus on the activity of God and His people in the here and now allows people to participate in the activities of faith. We can allow them to belong and live with us before they have come to believe like us. Although as Seventh-day Adventists we must never forget our call to proclaim the Second Coming of Jesus, that proclamation can only find its meaning and fulfillment in light of our efforts to create the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

6. Unchurched vs. Rechurched

Most of the contemporary literature on reaching out to the *unchurched* actually describes methods for reaching out to the re-churched. Vintage Faith Church Pastor Dan Kimball's observations of the modern

church growth movement are especially insightful for the current discussion. His findings conclude that the seeker style services popularized by Saddleback Community Church in Southern California and Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, Illinois have excelled at re-reaching Boomer Generation individuals who had wandered from participation in Christianity, but not its philosophical presuppositions (i.e., Bible as the Word of God, Jesus as the Son of God, etc.).

The modern seeker service methods in effect created what Sally Morgenthaler has called

real unchurched people group in North America. Extremely spiritual and committed to the pursuit of God, these communities have not viewed the church as a viable option for centering that pursuit. Rather, they tend to view *life* as the center of their pursuit of God, not a building and not a program.

Response to 6

Since most of church growth literature and methods have not been very successful in reaching the truly unchurched, it is important for the Christian community to evaluate all church growth tools in light of whether

Those growing up with postmodern mindsets and worldviews tend to have an intense desire to make a difference in their world.

the “Boomerang Effect” (Morgenthaler 1995:145). Boomers with previous Christian experience return to churches that repack-age the aesthetics of Christianity to suit their tastes at a time in their life when they are ready for the kind of stability church attendance brings. These methods, however, have not been effective at reaching younger generations who do not have previous experiences with Christianity (Kimball 2003:26, 27).

Those who are growing up in postmodern cultures are the

it will work with those who have never been to church. To live missionally among individuals who are postmodern in their experience of life will require creativity and innovation. Living missionally will, as Eddie Gibbs has carefully articulated, emphasize an incarnational and servant oriented approach which views church as more than a once-a-week gathering. Instead, a missional church is a community “in which each person makes an active contribution, during gathered worship as well as dis-

persed service” (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006:xiii). Therefore, carbon-copying Willow Creek or Saddleback not only is ineffective, it misses the point.

Missional communities are those that “live into the imagination that they are, by very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all creation in Jesus Christ” (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006:xv). Much of the joy and learning and flavor of the life of faith comes from our unique attempts to live our faith missionally among different people. Consequently, with the emergence of the missional church in sight, it will be extremely important for Christian leaders to always take the time to evaluate whether or not we are truly living missionally for the unchurched or programming for the re-churched.

7. Postmodern Communities No Longer Readily Adopt the Religion of Their Parents

Increasing numbers of younger generations are no longer adopting the religious expression of their parents. Institutional loyalty has not been able to withstand the onslaught of criticism provided by postmodern culture. As a result, for the first time in American history religion is chosen rather than received. Rather, the postmodern individual embarks on a spiritual quest marked by diverse communal experience, dialogue, and a healthy skepti-

cism of institutional loyalty in their religious quest.

Response to 7

In response to the diminishing number of occurrences in which children adopt the religion of their parents, the church community must actively attempt to be an influence in the lives of young students in their area. There is nothing more crucial to the development of a young person than having a caring adult take an interest in their life (Clark 2004:37–58). Therefore, we can maintain our influence in the lives of young people best by intentionally putting in place a system for engaging students in our communities.

In addition, instead of assuming that name brand loyalty alone will earn converts and adherents to our faith, we must seek to create an atmosphere where the quest of faith can be engaged. We must adopt a culture and an attitude inside the church membership that allows for people to move at their own pace, engaged in a spiritual journey. No longer must we view the church service or an educational organization as the delivery system for our faith, but instead seek to be a community that will serve as that delivery system.

8. Revamped Relationship with Institutions

Contrary to popular opinion, postmodern communities do not reject all institutions wholesale. They simply have readjusted

their view of the role an institution plays in life, especially the religious life. In the modern world the dominant view was that individuals served the institution and its goals and became a part of the institution's agenda.

Postmodern communities operate under the assumption that institutions should exist to aid the individual/community. The roles are effectively reversed, with the institution gaining legitimization through service. Without serving the community and aiding in its development and agenda, the institution will be effectively marginalized.

This is one of the important ways in which postmodern culture and those who experience life in that manner can add value to the church in its pursuit of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

I've shined your shoes,
I've moved your mountains and
marked your cards
But Eden is burning, either brace
yourself for elimination
Or else your hearts must have the
courage for the changing
of the guards.

Bob Dylan, *Changing of the Guards*,
1974.

**For the first time in American history
religion is chosen rather than received.**

Response to 8

Living as part of a postmodern community in which the collective mindset shares this relationship to institutions, church leaders must revamp their view of the church and begin seeing it as an institution that exists to add value and beauty to life. The church does not exist for people to add value to the church. As a result, this belief about the church must also be allowed to challenge the existing ideas about church and institutions by those already involved as members of the church. Those inside of the church must not hold loyalty to the institution above loyalty to the community or to their faith.

I don't fear postmodernism. I do not believe the church should either. Rather is it the new canvass on which the gospel story is waiting to be painted. The very fact that this canvass is different from the modern culture we are so used to ensures that Christianity in the postmodern world will have different hues, colors, and expressions of that faith. Just as Christianity in a Muslim culture looks different than the Christianity of America, Christianity in the postmodern world will look different than the Christianity of the modern world. This very diversity that is feared by some is a cause of joy and exhilaration for others. The only mistake that

can be made at this early juncture in the exploration of postmodern Christianity is for those who are not comfortable with this canvass to insist that the only true canvass for painting the Christian faith is the modern world.

I believe that the turn from the modern to the postmodern era that we are currently experiencing provides wonderful opportunities for the church to reevaluate its current practices. Postmodernity has arisen as a critique of the dominant culture of modernity. The cultural ethos is experiencing a shift that affects the fundamental assumptions of how people experience reality. The Christian mission must take this

to postmodern relativity by the church has been to argue for absolutism. But when we do that we fail to recognize that absolutism, built off of Cartesian epistemology, is not a biblical position. Living in response to a biblically informed faith relationship with God is the calling of the church, not arguing for absolutism (many church people fail to realize that the catalyst for postmodern relativism came in large part due to the destructive history of absolutist thought in modern history, not because of a penchant for hedonism or antinomism).

It is very true that the church faces the same danger with overaccommodating to postmodernity

Living in response to a biblically informed faith relationship with God is the calling of the church.

shift into consideration—even if it does not share the assumptions of that ethos. For the church to react defensively to this critique will cause it to miss an important opportunity to be challenged and see some of its blindspots.

Obviously there are many aspects of postmodern culture that, when evaluated in light of the gospel, should be challenged and transformed. Yet, too often the church's response to most aspects of postmodernity has been to argue for modernity. As an example, the typical response

like it did with modernity. In fact, the lessons of the church's engagement with modernity should provide us with a fuzzy blueprint on how to proceed with ministry in a postmodern context. However, those engaged in ministry in the postmodern context are noticing a surprising result of their effort: church is beginning to look more biblical. Andrew Perriman points out that many are discovering that the slow developing paradigm of postmodern ministry is "not only more congenial to a post-modern mentality but also—much to our

surprise—may have a better claim to be biblical (Perriman 2004:13, 14). With this in mind, it is our task to evaluate our success not in terms of our ability to mirror postmodernity, but in how well we are living out our biblical mandate in culturally relevant forms.

However challenging this shift of Western culture may be for the church, Christianity can engage this culture with a sense of expectation that God is not limited by a changing culture and will continue to work towards the redemption of humanity through the church. In fact, it may be argued that God is only limited by the church's refusal to move with God into new landscapes. The Holy Spirit has an incredible history of moving with the flow of humanity in order to affect that humanity from within. Inherent in the DNA of Christianity and the gospel is the ability of that message to adapt and contextualize for different cultures.

Christians have been excited by the successes of evangelism that Muslim contextualization of the gospel has provided in recent years. So too should Christians have excitement at the possibilities of contextualizing the gospel for the emerging postmodern generations. It is not about stripping the gospel of its truth value and moral power. It is about immersing the gospel in a new cultural setting and then allowing that gospel to transform the culture from the inside out.

Christianity's response to postmodernity is still developing. Much of the story is yet to be written. As

a result, concise answers to many of the challenges of postmodernity to the missional Christian are still being worked out and experimented with. However, we must be patient and allow the Kingdom to take shape before we formulate any judgments. To panic at the slow progress and hope to return to modern assumptions will guarantee the irrelevance of the Christian community in the future.

Works Cited

- Clark, Chap. 2004. *Hurt: Inside the lives of today's teenagers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Detweiler, Craig, and Barry Taylor. 2003. *A matrix of meanings: Finding God in pop culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The archaeology of knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan Bolger. 2005. *Emerging churches*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Grenz, Stanley. 1996. *A primer on postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kimball, Dan. 2003. *The emerging church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Morgenthaller, Sally. 1999. *Worship evangelism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Perriman, Andrew. 2006. *The coming of the Son of Man: New Testament eschatology for an emerging church*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster.
- Roxburgh, Alan, and Fred Romanuk. 2006. *The missional leader*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.